

Tragic and real-life families

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The Gladstone Prize 2005

The winner of the Gladstone Prize 2005 is Sarah Grisman of Kendrick School, London, and the runner-up Robert Hughes of Shrewsbury School for an essay on war in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Also excellent were submissions by Leo Maximillian Davidson of The Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School, Hertfordshire, Catriona Stephens of St Catherine's School, Bramley, and Yasmin Lynn of Belfast High School. Sarah's winning essay is printed below.

It is arguably impossible to find a family where all relationships are perfect. Presumably the same held for Classical Greece. If we live in close proximity to a small unit of people for a large proportion of time, chances are that we will inevitably find fault with those around us.

The families of Classical Greece had few of our modern-day ways of escapism or relaxation such as television or shopping malls. This might mean that faults often became exaggerated and conflict was less likely to be avoided. Not only that, but through Greek drama we can ascertain that the community where a family grew up was typically the only one they truly encountered in their lives (though obviously war could take men away for an undetermined length of time). The playwright Euripides seems to support this point: he places huge emphasis on the abnormality of Medea's foreign status, or on the hostility that the King of Thebes, Pentheus, displays towards a foreigner, Dionysus, in the *Bacchae*. The curse of Atreus has passed down through generations in Sophocles' play, *Electra*, but the family still live in the same palace where the curse originated. Because the families of Greek drama seem to reside in the same house or city for many lifetimes, we can assume the same for Classical Greek families. This would have meant an even more insular existence. There was little opportunity to escape when problems ensued, thus the severity of disputes was heightened.

Drawing on Greek drama

Greek drama shows us that the problems inside families were wide-ranging and could severely damage relationships. These issues could seem insignificant and petty to us: for example, Pentheus' embarrassment at seeing his grandfather dressed oddly in Euripides' *Bacchae* ('Sir, I am ashamed to see two men of your age with so little sense of decency') – or of larger importance: for example, Electra's pain on hearing of her brother Orestes' 'death' in Sophocles' *Electra* ('There is nothing for me but to go back to my slavery in this hateful house, my father's murderers' house'). Though Electra's problem is more severe, Pentheus' is a problem nonetheless; it would still impact on family relations. The emotions of both pain and embarrassment were no doubt common in Classical Greek families.

Greek drama also shows us that family members could have great affection for one another. In Sophocles' *Electra*, for example, Electra's joy and love is unmistakably clear and touching when she is reunited with her brother Orestes, whilst Clytemnestra still mourns greatly for her daughter, Iphigenia. These understandable emotions (emotions which we and an ancient Athenian reader can share in) imply that, under all the

curses, murders, and betrayals, the families in the plays were no different to real families; they can be our greatest comfort or nightmare.

Working within the parameters

We must remember though that the families presented to us in Greek drama do not represent a true-to-life historical account of family relations in Classical Greece. These are plays. They were written to be performed at the Dionysia festival, which was one of the biggest social events of the calendar. A Greek audience would not have wanted to sit through hours of dull, everyday family life. They wanted action, drama, suspense, and excitement. The playwrights were in competition with each other, thus had an extra incentive to make their work as dazzling and spectacular as possible. Therefore, the families we encounter in Greek drama are subject to hyperbole and cannot truly represent relationships of the average Athenian family.

On the other hand, a play is written for an audience. The audience would have felt no empathy towards the characters if they could not relate to them. The play would not seem alive and thus would be very unlikely to be hailed as a masterpiece. The fourth-century philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics* described Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as the ultimate tragedy for its construction. But this play is equally impressive because its protagonist, Oedipus, exhibits many human traits – pride, caution, anger, despair, which were no doubt common emotions of family members of Classical Greece.

Greek drama does not tell us that the average Greek family was cursed, subject to the cruel will of the gods, or plagued by murder. It does not tell us that, like Thyestes' children, family-members were eaten at banquets, or that a father's curse might mean that his son dies as a result of a wild bull appearing magically from the seas as Hippolytus meets his end! What it does tell us is that within a family-unit there could be lies and deceit – for example, Clytemnestra's welcome of her husband in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (see Richard Seaford's piece in the next issue). Relationships could be filled with jealousy, corruption, anger, and hatred. There could be strong women, cowardly husbands, covetousness (Jason's excuse for marrying Glauce in Euripides' *Medea*) or no desire for riches: for example in Sophocles' *Electra* when Electra chooses to sit outside the palace in her rags – though she does appear jealous of her sister's fine clothes. Conversely, Greek drama suggests that relationships between family-members could be loving (Electra and Orestes), full of adoration (Antigone, Ismene, and Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*), respectful (Electra towards her father, Agamemnon), or merely just acknowledging each other as family (Cadmus acknowledges Dionysus in the *Bacchae* – or at least seems to!).

The role of women

Greek drama seems to present us with many strong women within families: for example, Medea, Clytemnestra, and Electra. However, the playwrights still draw attention to the passive role stereotypical of Classical Greece's women. In the very first speech of Euripides' *Medea*, the nurse states: '...in marriage that's the saving thing, when a wife obediently accepts her husband's will'. The use of the word 'obediently' here clearly

shows the woman's role – passive and weak. It makes us think almost of a master and dog scenario and it seems that the women did not have an identity of their own. Though Euripides is sometimes thought of as misogynistic, this comment is typical of views of the time. Women stayed at home whilst men went away, and, if Greek drama is to be believed, they were not always happy about this. Medea's comment supports this idea of female discontentment: 'I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear one child'. She wants to be important.

The wives of real Greek husbands were less likely to have voiced such strong views. Relationships between husbands and wives would probably have paraded mutual respect. The strong women we do encounter do show human characteristics, for example Medea's turmoil when trying to decide whether to kill her children or Electra's sadness: 'I have no husband at my side to fight for me. I have borne no children.' It is such moments that lead us to realize that these women too, underneath their bravado, resemble real women.

Children and childhood

The role of children in Greek drama resonates with us today so may also have something to tell us about real Greek children and childhood. Children were a desire of any Greek family; they carried on the family name and looked after their parents in their old age. Before murdering her children, Medea states: '[I] imagined pitifully that you would care for my old age, and would yourselves wrap my dead body for burial. How people could envy me my sons!' In the same play, we see how important children are to the king of Athens, Aegeus, who goes to Apollo's oracle to pray in desperation. However, children were also meant to be obedient and to respect their parents. Iphigenia accepts that her father, Agamemnon, has to murder her to sail to Troy (though this is a very extreme example!). Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra* cannot stand her daughter's defiance. Electra calls her a 'mother-monster', 'mistress of the murderer that helped you kill my father', and even horrifically yells, 'strike her again, strike!' when Orestes finally murders her.

Children were meant to love and obey their parents in a similar way to the relationship between wife and husband. The best examples of this are Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*; they have come into exile with their father and care for him immensely though he is old and blind (and their half-brother as well as their father) – just the kind of care of which a real Greek family would approve.

Greek drama also highlights how hard it is to maintain good family relationships when step-parents or new family-members were introduced. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's suicide is the result of the lust for her step-son, Hippolytus. Aegisthus sleeping in Agamemnon's bed angers Electra, who refuses to accept him as her step-father and hates him more than anyone. Medea's wrath ensues as a result of her husband remarrying. These situations are all very likely to upset family dynamics and show a situation that a modern-day audience could relate to, never mind one in ancient Greece.

The cruelties of fate

Family dynamics were indeed fragile. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Clytemnestra at first appears strong, living with her new lover in a grand palace while Electra sits in rags whining outside. Upon Orestes' return, Electra becomes strong, revelling in her mother's murder and seeming powerful to the point of cruelty. This shows that relationships between members of Classical Greek families could also change dynamics – weaker characters could prove to be the strongest of all.

Just as the gods and curses had a large impact on the families in the plays, the actions of past generations played a large part in family relationships in Classical Greece. Oliver Taplin points out that in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* this has got to the point

where the curse is almost literally overflowing out of the house, represented visually by the red carpet. Past generations determined your reputation, your estate, even whom you married. An affluent family with a good reputation would have had a much easier life than those struggling to get by, like Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and relationships between family members in these two situations were likely to be different, as Greek drama shows. It is always the affluent who experience the worst downfall. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus or Theseus and Phaedra have further than most to fall.

In Greek drama, trust, selflessness, and honesty seem to be the emotions essential in retaining a family unit, or complete destruction of the most serious kind might ensue. For example, Oedipus' parents kept his fate from him (though in defence, they did not know he was alive!), and it was because of these secrets that he reached his terrible downfall. If we feel passionately about something, it impacts on us greatly. Therefore, the deceit, secrets, and lies that are common in Greek drama (e.g. Agamemnon taking Iphigenia from Clytemnestra) are effective because they show a breakdown of trust that is hard to bring back; with which the audience can empathize. It is hard to forgive and forget the actions of those we feel close to.

In conclusion, Greek drama tells us a great deal about relationships between members of the family in Classical Greece. The dramatists focused on families because it was a topic to which any individual could relate. We all have families, whether or not we know them or choose to accept them. We all know how fragile and strong relationships can be and can sympathize with many of the emotions we encounter in Greek drama. The plays can serve to remind us how important our families are, how easily relationships can break down. Classical Greek families would have been able to relate to characters they encountered in the plays, which is why we hear accounts from historians of people shouting out, women crying or even miscarrying when they watched such theatrical performances. It is not the actions, but the underlying emotions that give away the secrets of family relationships in Classical Greece, and plays achieve this spectacularly.